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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the question of standardization and educational equity among rural school systems and offers three "fundamental challenges" for educators. The first challenge is to take seriously the power of education and to resist the temptation to reduce expectations placed on education and educators. The power of education is illustrated through the comparison to a knife, which can be used for good or evil. The second challenge is for educators to resist the trivialization of educational power. Classroom methods and labels such as "at-risk students" tend to blame students for what are societal or system failures. A sense of "condemned future" is created, causing students, teachers, and parents to become disengaged or drop out of the educational process. The responsibility for "at-risk" students should be placed on educators, who might better see the dropout problem as "a massive, unorganized and, as yet, undeclared boycott of public education." Traditional solutions to the dropout problem (advertising, inschool suspensions, and dropout prevention counselors) do not respond to the causes. The third challenge is to make use of current opportunities to reverse the decline of rural education. A core of good people, an opportune moment in history, and a body of new ideas help to make the horizon brighter. Challenging projects are being undertaken across the country. This paper concludes by telling educators that the power of education and the power for educational change is in their hands. (TES)

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Challenging the Comfortable Stereotypes:
Rural Education and Rural Development

BY
Jonathan P. Sher

May 1989

This paper contains a revised transcript of a presentation by Dr. Jonathan P. Sher at a symposium, "Risky Futures: Should State Policy Reflect Rural Diversity?," sponsored by AEL's Policy and Planning Center on December 4-5, 1988, in Louisville, Kentucky. Dr. Sher is president of Rural Education and Development, Inc., Chapel Hill, North Carolina.

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Challenging the Comfortable Stereotypes

Let's cut right to the heart of the matter. Should state policy reflect rural diversity? Yes! [Sher returns to his chair and sits down. Audience laughs.]

[Sher returns to podium] Seriously, I don't want to discuss the issue of whether state policy should reflect rural diversity. The reason is that it would mean behaving as if that's a serious question. It would mean endowing that question with more importance and credibility than it deserves.

Should state policy reflect rural diversity? We're past that question as a profession and as a society. To focus on this question, I'd have to pretend that you couldn't distinguish between a simplistic notion of <u>equality</u> and a more sophisticated concept of <u>equity</u>. Since I know you understand that it's appropriate to treat people according to their needs--rather than treating all people, all communities, and all institutions exactly the same--there's no point in pretending that such confusion exists here.

Similarly, it seems unacceptable to treat you as if you were confused about another couple of words just because they sounded similar. I don't believe that anybody in this room really believes that the idea of <u>standards</u>, is the same as the idea of <u>standardization</u>. I'm sure nobody here really believes in their heart-of-hearts that standardization makes sense--for that would require believing there's only <u>one</u> right way of educating children, only <u>one</u> right way of

organizing schools, only one right way of meeting a reasonable set of educational standards. Such a belief would require extraordinary arrogance on your part, and I don't believe you are that arrogant. So why pretend?

And, finally, in order to take seriously the question "Should state policy reflect rural diversity?", I'd have to treat you as if you believed that systematically ignoring rural realities, and systematically excluding rural people from fair representation is an acceptable thing to do in a modern democracy. I know you don't believe that, so why pretend?

Three Challenges

Instead of addressing this non-question, I'd like to spend my time with you discussing three fundamental challenges confronting all of us at this conference--and in our lives back home.

Take the Power of Education Seriously

The first challenge is to take seriously the power of education and the power of educators. There's an undercurrent in this conference. I hear it often at professional meetings in the form of murmur declaring: "We're already asked to do too much. There are too many expectations of education and of educators. How much more can be loaded onto our shoulders?" We often feel relatively powerless and want to say, "Wait a minute. Let's set realistic limits. Let's tone down the expectations."

I'd like to challenge you not to yield to this voice of temptation. The expectations placed upon us as educators are, in fact, extraordi-

narily modest compared to the true power and potential of education. After all, education is the fundamental, human process that guides, shapes, and informs us from the moment of our birth to (at least) the hour of our death. We talk about lifelong learning as an innovation. We should view it as an inescapable fact of life, as a hallmark of what it means to be human.

Education is the most serious and profound process of transformation we experience as human beings. Genetics determines the hand we've been dealt. Education determines how we play that hand. And, therefore, education is the key to empowerment for us all.

Somewhere deep inside, we may know--and believe in--the true meaning and power of education. But this understanding rarely is reflected in how we speak--and act--as educators. We nod acquiescently when told our role is to raise SAT scores, to make sure we cover pages by date, and to keep our students quiet and our classrooms tidy. How easily we go along with the idea that our purpose is to sort out those students who are "college material" from those who will become our "worker bees."

We sell ourselves (and our students) short, and we allow others to sell us short, when we fail to powerfully act upon the truth that education worthy of the name is about the lives of children, the future of our entire society, and the foundation of all human progress. Without education, there is no technological advancement; without education, there is no scientific or medical progress; without education, there is no economic development; without education, there is no culture; without education; there is no civilization. These are the precious gifts

entrusted to us as educators--not SAT scores and the other silly ways in which we allow the essence of education to be trivialized.

Is education always good? A lot of us went into education because we wanted to do something good, because we saw ourselves as good people who care about children. And yet, to state that education is always good also trivializes it. Education is not always good--but, it is always powerful.

Allow me to illustrate the difference. I asked the waiter for two common objects. The first one is a Kleenex. Now a Kleenex, in my judgment, is something that comes close to always being good. If you have a runny nose, then a Kleenex is a good thing to have. But I don't think anybody here would regard a Kleenex as something powerful.

The other object is a reasonably sharp knife. This knife has the capacity to be used to accomplish great good. In the hands of a skilled surgeon, this knife could save your life. In the hands of an artist, it could be used to produce objects of beauty. If you were in the wilderness, a knife like this could help you to survive. Of course this knife also could be used to do great harm. This knife could kill you. It also could be used to carry out a rape or a robbery. It could be used to slash a work of art beyond repair.

The difference between the knife and the Kleenex is clear. Objects, activities, and emotions we regard as powerful receive this label because they have the inherent capacity for both good and evil, for proper use and for misuse, for the greater glory of people, or for their degradation.

Education is much more like a knife than a Kleenex. Education is not always good, but education is always powerful. It is our respon-

sibility to use that knife--to use that power invested in us--to promote as much good as we possibly can. We haven't always done so. Thus, the first challenge is to remember, and responsibly employ, the power we hold in our hands by virtue of being educators.

Resist the Temptation to Trivialize Education

The second challenge is to resist the temptation toward the trivialization of education's inherent power and potential for goodness. Too often we've allowed schools to be structured and operated like a Trivial Pursuit game. We tend to teach students to recall random facts far more diligently than we prepare them to function as effective citizens in a democratic society, or to reach their full potential as healthy, happy, and productive human beings.

The national focus on at-risk students is an example of how serious problems become trivialized in our schools. When we talk about at-risk students, we set up a situation in which we very easily end up blaming the victim. Talking about kids as being at-risk tends to let us off the hook, because if things don't work out for them, then we can say, "Well, we tried, but gosh they were at-risk students." That's not good enough.

The at-risk makes the problem the property of that person, rather than of the schools or society. This, in turn, had led us into a host of strategies aimed at fixing the individual student, rather than fixing the damaging aspects--the failure-inducing components--of our education systems. As long as we primarily seek individualistic, rather than institutional changes, we will continue to trivialize (rather than solve) the problems faced by these youths.

There's another way of looking at this set of issues. The title of this conference is "Risky Futures." To be absolutely honest with you, I wish that the futures of a lot of rural students and communities were riskier, because they're not very risky now. Rather, these students are facing a predictably bad future: bad for them as individuals, bad for their communities, and bad for our society. For example, one out of every three ninth graders in North Carolina (and across Appalachia) predictably will not graduate with their high school class. One out of every three! That's millions of kids!! What's the future hold for a kid without a high school degree in this economy and the even tougher economy looming ahead of us? It's not a risky future--it's a condemned one. They're condemned to economic marginality, and social marginality, and political marginality. There's not risk there. It's frighteningly predictable.

Now, think about all the kids who haven't physically dropped out, but who mentally and emotionally dropped out long ago. That's a significant number of young people who are only physically present--perhaps another one out of every three students. If you add these two groups of students together, then you have an enormous number of young people who have become disengaged from the school's essential learning processes. We're not talking about some special interest group. We're talking about a clear majority of the young people today.

Now, who else can we add to that list? Perhaps we should add to that list all the good educators who've left the profession in recent years. Add up the number of people who have left, the number of people who are

considering leaving soon, and the number of people who are not going into education at all--even though they're inclined to teach--simply because they've lost faith in the institution. And then--once you've got all those kids and adults in mind--add those teachers who, like their students, are there physically, but who mentally and emotionally dropped out years ago, who are doing the same routine things in the same routine ways, day in and day out, year in and year out. That's a lot of educators. And then, there are the parents--the parents who we often write off too quickly as being the cause of the problems for these at-risk students. The parents who we often label as apathetic, when, in fact, what may be more true of many parents is that they feel injured and excluded by the schools. Remember, these parents were the previous generation of students, and many of them came away from their experience feeling poorly served, if not just plain mistreated by the schools. Thus, unfortunately, many students find an all-too-sympathetic audience at home when they complain about their schools. Their anger, boredom, and disappointment resonate well with a lot of parents. A significant percentage of parents who can afford to--and even a fair number of parents who really can't--are sending their kids to private schools. In community after community, parents are withholding their active, energetic support (financial and otherwise) of the public schools.

Let's take stock of the situation. When you combine the parents who have stayed out, with the educators who are getting out, and with the students who are dropping out, would you really describe the problem as being one of <u>at-risk students</u>? It seems to me that what's happening in

this country is a massive, unorganized, and, as yet, undeclared boycott of public education. There's this huge boycott going on, and our educational leaders are ignoring it to pursue a trivialized set of individualistic remedies.

Why is it useful to call this boycott by its correct name? First, it puts the responsibility (and the onus) back where it belongs--on the institution--instead of on the individual. Maybe an analogy will help make the point here. Think for a minute about a public transportation system. It operates subways, taxis, buses, and whatever other kinds of public transport it can. And yet, one out of every three riders is not getting to the final destination intended for them. Think about that! Imagine a transportation system that loses a third of its passengers somewhere on route--and that also has the drivers and ticket takers bailing out!! Think about a situation in which people would rather walk miles and miles along predictably difficult paths and experience harsh conditions than set foot into that transportation system. Would we say in that situation, "Oh, I see what's wrong. That's a problem of <u>at-risk riders</u>?" I don't believe we'd say any such thing. What we'd really say is, "That public transportation system better get its act together so that it can get the passengers where they're supposed to be going, maintain good morale among its staff, and fulfill the important purposes for which it was created."

When I think about education these days, it reminds me of the old television show, "Queen for a Day." You remember "Queen for a Day" consisted of three women coming out on stage, each telling a tale of woe

sadder than the one before. One woman would come out, and she'd say, "My husband died, and I've never worked, and there was no insurance, and what am I going to do?" And the second woman would come out, and she'd say, "My house just burned down. It wasn't insured, and where am I going to live?" And the third woman would come out, and she'd say, "My kids have a chronic illness, and there's no good medical care around here, and I have no medical insurance, so what am I going to do?" They had serious problems, real problems. At the end of the program, whoever got the most applause from the studio audience was "Queen for a Day." That's pretty bizarre. But what was <u>really</u> bizarre about "Queen for a Day" was what happened after they won. These women had serious problems. Did they get a new house? Did they get good medical care? Did they get job training and a job? No! Instead, they got a trip to Acapulco and something from the Spiegel Catalog!! Serious problems, but only a trivial, unconnected response.

It seems to me that we, as a society, play that game of "Queen for a Day" with the lives of children all too often. They have serious problems, and the "solutions" offered by the educational system are often just as trivial--just as beside the point--as they were on that game show.

Trivialization is not a problem of the past. It is still with us today. It can be seen, for example, in the ways in which the issue of dropout prevention is being handled. In my experience, dropout prevention revolves around three key strategies--all of which have the individualistic, rather than institutional, characteristics mentioned earlier.

The first dropout prevention strategy revolves around a public relations campaign. In some schools and communities, posters command STAY IN SCHOOL! I try imagining the scene: A kid walks by, he's frustrated, he's bored, he's not feeling like anybody cares about him, or that there's any point in staying. However, as he walks by, he looks at the poster, stops in his tracks and says, "Yes, now I think I'll stay in school!" Come on, get serious. What a trivial response to such a complex set of problems.

The second strategy is, in some respects, even more amazing. Twenty years from now, I'll tell this story, and kids won't believe that the response to the dropout problem was something called in-school suspension. What does that term actually mean? Well, in my experience, it means that we put kids in a special room and physically prevent them from dropping out. How can we say with a straight face that we expect this practice to reverse the tide sweeping one-in-three young people out of school prior to graduation?

The third strategy is to hire a dropout prevention counselor. We tend to like this one, because it translates in more professional jobs for us. Now I've seen where some of these counselors are located. They usually have a nasty little office at the end of a very long hallway in a part of the building where the kids rarely go. The notion that the person sitting there--waiting to help kids readjust to fit the school--is going to solve the dropout problem would be funny, if it weren't so pathetic. It's playing "Queen for a Day" with the lives of our kids and with the futures of our communities. It's just not good enough.

Accept the Grace, Reverse the Tide

Enough bad news. The third, and final, challenge I have to offer is on the positive side. In all the darkness and gloom, alongside all those failings, surrounding that dark cloud, there is a silver lining. At the same time that we have unprecedented problems, we also have unprecedented opportunities right before us. The challenge is to make good use of those opportunities right in front of our own eyes, right here, right now.

One of the questions--one of the challenges before us as educators--is whether we will accept the grace we've been given. Because there is grace in our professional lives, as well as in our personal lives.

One of the examples of grace--and one of the reasons for hope--is the understanding that the problems we have are not inevitable. Rural decline, whether economic or education, is not inevitable. I've read the Bible recently enough and closely enough to feel confident in saying there's nothing indicating it's God's will that there be rural decline. I'm not a scientist, but I know enough about science to know that there's no natural law dictating that there will be rural decline, or mistreatment of rural people, or educational trivialization.

The good news is that we can choose to make life better in our schools, and beyond. Because we're involved in education, we have the most powerful force known to man in our hands. We have the choice, and the chance, to use that power to foster lasting institutional reform, to end the boycott of our schools, and to spark the rejuvenation of our rural communities.

The second bit of grace we've been given is a core of good people, smart people, energetic people, hardworking people, and people with vision and leadership who care about our schools and communities. We haven't been terribly good about organizing these good folks and making important things happen. But the good news remains that those good folks are still there to be organized. We don't have to wait for a new generation to find people with vision and courage, and talent and wisdom. They're among us, even now, even in this room. That's really good news. Without these people, our situation would be desperate. Instead, it's merely difficult.

The third bit of good news is that we're in the midst of an almost magical historic moment that wasn't here 10 years ago, and, I predict, will not be here 10 years from now. It's a moment when the old orthodoxy is dying--when there is a widespread understanding that more of the same is not the solution to our problems in rural education or rural economic development. And yet, the new orthodoxy that inevitably will replace the old has not yet come into being. We're between orthodoxies. History tells us that there have been these moments before, but they don't last--largely because policy, like nature, abhors a vacuum. But right now, right here, we have the chance to try creative new ideas. We have the chance to make important changes. We have the chance to influence the shape and content of the new orthodoxy. We have that power. It's an amazing opportunity--and one we dare not squander.

The last piece of good news is that we have good ideas upon which to draw and valuable visions to guide us. Some of these ideas and visions

are not entirely new. Some, like those of John Dewey, have been badly misrepresented in the past, but remain available to us today. Dewey envisioned a system of education in which rigorous classroom instruction was skillfully blended with important experiential education opportunities. Dewey's continuous cycle of careful study, meaningful action, and systematic reflection upon that action is a sensible place to start constructing a sound pedagogy for the future. We also have ideas and examples that offer us a nontrivial version of school-community partnerships. They challenge us to build our education systems from the life of the communities in which they operate--not to keep kids trapped locally--but rather to enable them to make their choices about the future from a firm foundation of a positive self-image, a history of active citizenship, and a repetoire of skills that are meaningful in the world.

A variety of wonderful activities are going on all over the country--good work that is capitalizing upon this special historical moment. Paul DeLargy and I personally are involved in transforming one of these good ideas into an equally good reality. Through an organization named REAL Enterprises, we are helping rural schools to become small-business incubators and rural students to become job creators, instead of remaining trapped as job applicants. Our school-based enterprise program is designed to restore as a viable option to stay and succeed, alongside the traditional option to leave their own community in pursuit of greener pastures. Our program combines classroom instruction in entrepreneurship, applied economics, and small business management, with the creation of student-owned and operated

ventures--honest-to-goodness businesses, not demonstrations or simulations. When they graduate, their businesses graduate with them. It's a very Deweyan model of education, which attempts to directly and powerfully link rural education and rural development through student entrepreneurship. In larger terms, however, it's just one of a hundred interesting, useful, and important ideas that could be flourishing nationwide.

It's In Your Hands

That's the challenge. Will we accept responsibility for making the best possible use of this wonderful historic moment? Will we reclaim the power of education and put that power to work in the lives of the kids and communities we serve? Are we willing to put aside the triviality of so much of what we do each day and commit ourselves to a more powerful education agenda?

In closing, I'd like to tell a story. It is the story about a wise old man. It's a story that was first told by Fanny Lou Hamer. And she said:

> There was a very wise old man, and he could answer questions that were almost impossible for people to answer. Well, some young people were going to see him one day. On the way there, they said to themselves, "We're going to trick this old man today, this old man who seems to know the answers to all the questions. We're going to catch a bird, and we're going to carry it to this old man, and we're going to ask him: 'This that we hold in our hands today, is it alive or is it dead?' And if he says, 'Dead,' we're going to turn it loose and let it fly away. But if he says, 'Alive,' we're going to crush it." And so they did. They walked up to the old man and they said,

> "This that we hold in our hands today, is it alive or is it dead? And the old man looked at the young people and he smiled. He said simply, 'It's in your hands. It's in <u>your</u> hands.'"

The real issue before us isn't, "Should state policy reflect rural diversity?" The real issue is whether we, as caring citizens and daring professionals, are going to take seriously the power that is in <u>our</u> hands, and then use that power to enhance and extend the grace we have been given.

We will always be imperfect people in an imperfect world. However, by accepting these challenges, and by putting our life's energy behind their fulfillment, we can make this world a little less imperfect, and perhaps, make ourselves a little less imperfect in the process.

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